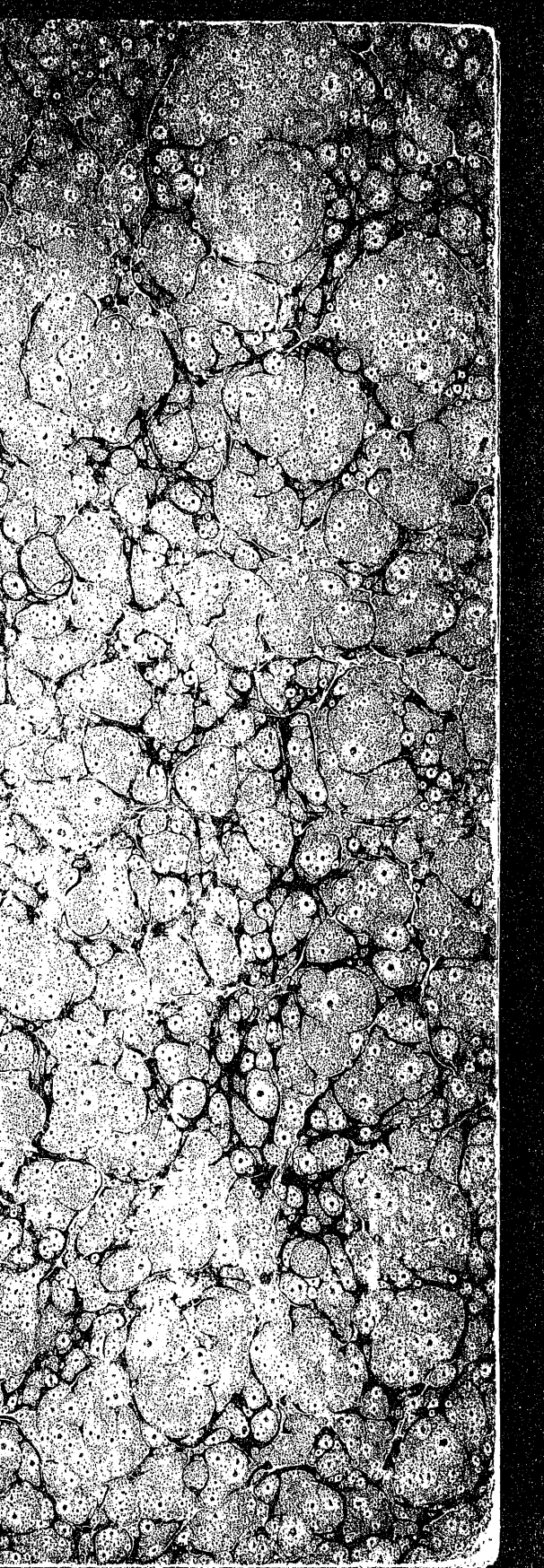


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THE TRANSCENDENT ELEMENT IN THE CHURCH.

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT AUGUSTUS H. ^{James}STRONG,

OF THE

ROCHESTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,

AT THE

INTERNATIONAL CONGREGATIONAL COUNCIL,

BOSTON, SEPTEMBER 27, 1899.

Mr. President and Members of the International Congregational Council, Ladies and Gentlemen:—

I respond to your gracious invitation to address you, with some due sense I trust of the dignity of the body which I address, and of the responsibility which rests upon me in assuming to speak for the four millions of my brethren in the United States who bear the Baptist name. I bring to you the assurance of their Christian fellowship, of their pride in your glorious past, and of their prayers to God for your future growth and prosperity. I can do this with the more sincere affection because I am a loyal son of Yale, and feel a personal debt of obligation which I can never fully repay to my revered teachers Woolsey and Porter and Hadley and Dwight and Fisher. One of the most vivid reminiscences of my College days is that of a cartoon, handed about in my class one morning, which depicted Professor James Hadley trotting a small baby upon his knee to the tune of *Ton d'apomeibomenos prosephe potumetis Odusscus*, and this was the first announcement to the student world that President Arthur T. Hadley was born. With all these Homeric and paternal influences about me it was a narrow escape for me that I did not become a Congregationalist myself. I feel to-night that I am coming back to my friends.

But, entirely apart from all personal considerations, I am at home with you. Doctrinally and historically, the Congregational and the Baptist strands are woven closely together. Hall Caine says that the Deemster had two sons who were utterly unlike each other: they were as unlike as the inside and the outside of a bowl,—but the bowl was old Deemster himself. So there are serious differences between Congregationalists and Baptists, but they both trace their descent from one common stock. Of course we think of ourselves as on the inside. Baptists indeed are only Congregationalists of the Congregationalists, Congregationalists raised to the *nth* power, Congregationalists who, as you will be apt to say, by our inhuman treatment of infants, out-Herod Herod with our Congregationalism, Baptist doctrine of the supremacy of Scripture, of each man's right to interpret Scripture for himself, of the duty of conforming the church to Scripture,

this is the formative principle of Congregationalism. It is the doctrine of the Pilgrims. It is the Separatism to which the Pilgrims soon converted the Puritans of the Bay. Baptists think it is because we have held consistently to this kernel of your creed, its inmost principle of vitality, that we have grown to be in numbers the second denomination in the land.

The Baptist is only the quintessence of a Congregationalist, a Congregationalist not narrowed, but only condensed and boiled down. The quintessence of most things is volatile, and that accounts in part for our leaving you and setting up for ourselves. The missionary to the Maories in New Zealand, on returning from a vacation, found one of his converts missing, and in reply to his inquiries was told: "He gave us so much good advice that we had to eat him up." Roger Williams would possibly have stayed with you, if you only had permitted him to give you good advice. But the greatest of vices is sometimes advice. It was the greatest vice of Roger Williams. You did not deal with him after the Maori fashion—he would have been very indigestible. But you did intimate to him that Narragansett Bay would furnish him a better auditorium than Massachusetts Bay. So Roger Williams became first a Baptist, and then a Seeker, and gave us the right to maintain that a Baptist was the first to embody in a civil government the principle of entire religious liberty.

I acknowledge that at the first we Baptists had too much of the Separatist spirit. We carried our independence to an extreme. We were inclined to separate not only from the standing order but also from our own churches. But during the last century we have gained a new sense of denominational unity, and, with this, a new sense of our oneness with the whole church of God throughout the world. We have learned something of the new zoölogy which classifies by similarities rather than by differences. We are coming to emphasize the agreements more than we emphasize the disagreements, and we hope that soon denominational barriers, even if they continue to exist, will be completely hidden by the activities of the church, as the fences in the summer time are hidden by the growing corn. I am not sure but that we Baptists have learned something of our recent interdependence from you, our next neighbors in the Congregational faith. Your Associations and Consociations, your Synods and Councils, have been object lessons to us. We, too, have our nonlegislative Associations and National Missionary Societies, and there are many among us of late who urge that we add to our present system a new form of interdependence in the shape of permanent local Councils, to which the individual churches of any given Association may apply for advice.

But if we learned something of our *interdependence* from you, I am inclined to think that in earlier times you learned something of your *independence* from us, or at least from the Anabaptists who preceded us. You are apt to point to Robert Browne as the first proclaimer of religious liberty in England. But, as your distinguished historian, Williston Walker, has generously pointed out, Robert Browne came from Norwich, where more than half the population was composed of immigrants from the Netherlands. Many of these immigrants were Anabaptists, driven to England by persecution. There were Anabaptist Conventicles at Norwich, and Robert

Browne could hardly have been so near them without learning something from them. His own Confession dates back only to 1582. But in 1575 Terwoort, the Anabaptist, had suffered martyrdom in London, declaring that "the true church of God is persecuted; but never persecutes." As early as 1560, indeed, John Knox quoted an English Anabaptist as claiming absolute freedom of conscience. Robert Browne's independency may possibly have been original with him, but it is certain that he was not the first advocate of soul-liberty in England. Is it not probable that he caught his independence from his next neighbors, the Anabaptists of Old England, even as later we may have caught a portion of our interdependence from you Congregationalists of New England? Is it likely that he and his followers would have taken refuge in Holland, if he had not known that the principles of religious liberty had come from Holland?

But whether you are a branch of the Baptists or we a branch of the Congregationalists is not a matter of so great importance. The really important thing is our agreement in the great essentials of the Christian faith and in our general conceptions of the Christian church through which that faith is expressed to the world. Both your fathers and ours contended that the church should be spiritual and scriptural. Our ancestors were with yours when they left home and country to establish such a church on these rocky shores. And so we, who went out from you, put in our claim to inheritance from those same fathers. We too share in the memory of that wind-swept graveyard of Plymouth, where during the first year were laid away a full half of those who came over as settlers in the Mayflower. We see something more than human in their persistent courage. Congregationalists and Baptists alike have suffered for their faith, and it is proof that there is a transcendent element in their conceptions of the church.

Abraham Lincoln defined the word transcendental by pointing to the swallow-holes in the banks of the Ohio river: "Take away the banks, and what is left will be transcendental." The word transcendent in my use of it is something different from this. I mean by it the invisible and eternal which lies at the basis of the visible and temporal. The transcendent element in man is the soul; for the soul, though itself spiritual, energizes and informs the body; without the soul indeed the body is not a true body; but a corpse instead. What then is the transcendent element in the church? It is Christ, and his life; for Christ is the soul of the church, and the church is essentially the body of Christ. Here is the ultimate ground and rationale of Christian union, that, as every believer is spiritually united to Christ, so all believers are spiritually united to one another. It is this spiritual fellowship of the universal church of God which we celebrate tonight. I congratulate you and I congratulate myself that we all belong to this one body of Christ, and that through one common Holy Spirit we have access to the Father. Our differences are superficial: in our inmost heart

" We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
One in charity."

Our Congregational and Baptist fathers had this conception of an invisible and spiritual church. But they went further. They seized upon a principle which united Baptists and Congregationalists but separated both these from other bodies of Christians. What was this principle of their common faith? It was this: They held that the invisible body of Christ was to have its characteristics reflected in visible form, and that there was a divinely appointed embodiment of this supersensible reality in the doctrine and organization, the ordinances and worship, of the church on earth. They did not regard the order of the visible church as merely human and optional; like Moses, they would constitute it after the pattern of heavenly things, the pattern which they had seen in the mount. That mount of vision they thought to be Holy Scripture. They had no manner of doubt that the Scriptures contained such a pattern, and they had no manner of doubt that the pattern there revealed was authoritative and final. To admit into their polity anything that was merely human, traditional, unscriptural, was to be false to that transcendent element which was the distinction and glory of the Church of Christ.

If you seek for a symbol of that mechanical and external unity which is consistent with the church's deepest moral corruption, you can find it in the middle-age cathedral, with its long vistas of vaulted arches and colonnaded aisles, looming up before the traveler while he is yet miles away, the focus of many converging ways and the center of a whole city's adoration, yet, with all its height and space and gloom and glory, a mount of marble piled by human hands, with many a demon face grinning from gargoyle and clustered column to suggest the presence and power of the Evil One. The Pilgrims of 1625 had a fairer and nobler vision before them as they marched three by three, with muskets on their shoulders, up the rough street of Plymouth, between the rows of hewn-plank houses, to the square meeting-house on the hill-top with its six cannon planted on the roof. To them the church was something entirely distinct from the meeting-house; it was an invisible and spiritual structure; they were building it for a habitation of God through the Spirit; and, whether they knew it or not, the City of God, with its streets of gold and walls of jasper and gates of pearl, had already come down from God out of heaven, and God had begun to dwell with men. Being members of the body of Christ, they were themselves a holy temple in the Lord—a temple which should never crumble or dissolve, but whose lifetime was eternity. They were careful about the doctrine, the organization, the ordinances, the worship of the earthly church, only because they saw in it the temporal expression and concrete embodiment of the Jerusalem that is above.

Here is the secret of our independency as Congregationalists and as Baptists. All through the English Revolution under Cromwell, and through the American Revolution under Washington, Baptists and Congregationalists stood shoulder to shoulder in their struggle against ecclesiastical and civil tyranny,—and that, because the Congregational principle recognizes every believer as a priest and a king, and can tolerate no intermediaries between him and Christ. When Wicklyffe preached his doctrine of lordship, he sowed the first seed of the Reformation in England, and when the

Pilgrims proclaimed the sole lordship of Christ they prepared the way in America for a church without a bishop and a state without a king. This principle has made you leaders in education, in theology, and in missions. And why? Because the duty of each believer to take his part in the government of the church requires trained intelligence, and that means education; because this trained intelligence is under the law of Scripture, and the study of Scripture means an improved theology; because direct subjection to the law of Christ makes every believer responsible to the whole world for which Christ died, and this means modern missions.

During a lull in that awful massacre of the Armenian Christians at Sassoun, when the ground was thickly strewn with the mangled and the dead and the savage Kurds were too tired further to pursue their work of slaughter, the fearful and unusual silence was broken by a question of one of those same Kurds: "Who is that 'Lord Jesus' that they were calling to?" It was the first time that the merciless dragoon had heard Christ's name, and he heard it uttered as Saul heard it uttered by the lips of Stephen. The pallid faces of those Armenian martyrs were turned to Christ, as Stephen's was, and they too cried in their death-agonies: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" The overmastering conviction of the sole lordship of Christ has made your converts and ours willing in every land to suffer for his sake. No wonder that the unspeakable Turk fears your Congregational missions. He sees in them the preparation for free government, and the sign that Mohammedan tradition is nearing its fulfilment and Islam is giving way to the religion of the Cross.

You gave us our Rice and our Judson, and your American Board gave the impulse that led to the formation of our Missionary Union. Plymouth numbered only three hundred souls after ten years of settlement, but these three hundred have now increased two thousand fold. Yet it has been Baptists who have shown the greatest power of multiplication. When the critics tell you that Congregationalism dooms a church to confinement within the region where it is indigenous, you can tell them that Baptists are Congregationalists, and Baptists have shown that Congregational polity is no hindrance to the broadest expansion in a great and growing country like our own. When the critics say that Congregationalism is divisive and not unitary, that its voluntary principle has no organizing power, that individual believers and individual churches have nothing to draw them together, you can tell them that Baptists are Congregationalists, and that they are one, not only in the faith of their fathers, but in the work of spreading the gospel at home and abroad. When the critics say that Congregationalism lacks the power of a sacramental system because it teaches so much by words and so little by symbols, you can point to Baptists as proof that symbols, held to their office as symbols and counted worthless except as signs of a preëxisting faith, may have as great a power in a Congregational as in a sacramental system. Keep in mind the transcendent element in the church, make sure that Christ himself is with us, and the Congregational polity will answer every demand. For

"Mightier far than strength of nerve and sinew,
Or sway of magic, potent over sun and star,
Is LOVE."

The true sacramentalism is the abiding presence and energizing of the transcendent Christ. Even if Scripture gave us no model, or if the model given had no authority, still the voluntary and democratic polity is best on purely rational grounds, because most congruous with the true theory of the church as the body of Christ, and best adapted to reflect and express to the world the direct relation between the believer and his Lord. Congregational church polity is the best polity for very good people. Its greatest merit is that for its successful working its members must live in constant communion with Christ. It would not be a better polity if it gathered the world into the church. Christ has made no provision for the Satanic possession of Christians. It is best that a church in which Christ does not dwell should by dissension or immorality reveal its weakness and fall topieces; and any outward organization which conceals inward disintegration and compels a merely formal union after the Holy Spirit has departed is a hindrance instead of a help to true religion.

Let me quote to you an utterance of one of the most noble and godly of your fathers. About the year 1705, your own Increase Mather declared that "the Congregational church-discipline is not suited for a worldly interest or for a formal generation of professors. It will stand or fall, as godliness, in the power of it, does prevail or otherwise." That was less than a century after the landing of the Pilgrims, yet it was a day of religious declension,—which shows that the same danger to which the National Church in England had succumbed still attended the reformed churches in America. Increase Mather went on to say: "If the begun apostasy should proceed as fast the next thirty years as it has done these last, surely it will come to pass in New England (except the Gospel depart, with the order of it) that the most conscientious people therein will think themselves concerned to gather churches out of churches." And you know how that prediction was fulfilled. History has given abundant proof that Congregationalists and Baptists alike have grown and prospered because, and when, and just so far as they have kept in mind the transcendent element in the church.

I would summon all Congregationalists, and Baptists among them, to be proud of their polity and to defend their heritage. We have something which religious zeal and patriotism may well defend. And yet it is union with Christ, and not external union with any particular church that represents him, that binds us most closely together. Blood is thicker than water, and the atoning blood is more important than the baptism which merely symbolizes it. "Here," as our John Bunyan said so long ago, "here is a common ground of communion which no differences of external rites can efface." Burke said that "the nation is indeed a partnership, but a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born." The Church is a partnership grander still. It includes ten thousand times ten thousand who have gone to their rest, and a multitude whom no man can number who shall yet follow their example and share their reward. But there is a silent Partner, a transcendent Partner, more important still. It is Christ, the Son of God. Let us cultivate that personal relation

to him which is the living ground of the Church of Christ. Then the church shall not only live but grow. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Past increase shall be only, like Pentecost, a first fruits of the great world-harvest that is to come. God shall lead us out under the night-sky, as he led out Abraham, and pointing us to the myriads of heaven's host he shall say to us also, "*So shall thy seed be!*"



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